1: Gorer J-5 (1937)1938 AK5 Lepcha AK5

'From that time Ginoo *moong pandi* and Linthem *anyou* destroy all those who are too prosperous or have too many children. That is the reason why you should never remark on a person's prosperity; for if Ginoo *moong* hears you they will lose everything.'

Ginoo *moong* still claims victims today. One of the latest was the wife of Ongden, one of the richest members of the community, unique in having six healthy sons. She was always grumbling, saying how poor she was and how little ground they had been able to sow; to which the neighbours would reply 'How greedy you are; you are really very prosperous.' Ginoo *moong* heard this talk, and so she died, while still young. It is also perhaps the fear of Ginoo *moong* which makes Lepchas so reluctant to say what their property is; it was practically the only subject on which people were secretive and unwilling to talk; most of the information I obtained on the subject I got from neighbours. The majority of the households are all on nearly the same economic level; four or five are somewhat above, and three below the average.

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The chief crops raised by the Lepchas on the Talung side of Zongu are wet rice, dry rice, buckwheat, maize, cardamum, and different varieties of millet or eleusine. On the warmer Teesta side a certain amount of sugar cane and manioc is also raised. The wet rice is naturally exclusively cultivated on the terraced fields, which are capable of being flooded. Seven different types of wet rice are recognised—two of them being suitable for cultivation on the higher terraces, while the other five need the warmer climate of the valley. Some of the richer people grow these five varieties in rotation, as this is believed to rest the soil, the variety sown depending on individual choice; in these cases the seed is not saved, but is bought each year, generally from Gangtok. The majority however only grow one variety and save their own seed.

In Lingthem wet rice has been introduced for less than twenty years, and in other villages even more recently; some places, especially on the far side of the Talung, where the natural water is less plentiful, do not grow it yet. When the Mandal first learned about this crop he had experimental terraces made for three years; it was then gradually adopted by the other villagers, as they became convinced of the superior yield of this crop, and the amount of terraced ground is increased annually. Almost every household

1: Gorer J-5 (1937)1938 AK5 Lepcha AK5

has at least a couple of terraces and some considerably more. These terraces are scattered all over the valley, and it is rare for two contiguous strips to belong to the same owner. It is theoretically permissible to exchange plots so that they shall be better grouped, but nobody considers doing so.

The rice terraces are turned with a rough single-pointed wooden plough drawn by a pair of oxen, as is the *sing* or field-garden near the house. Except on these artificially levelled places the ground is too precipitous for the use of a plough to be possible. Two main crops are raised in the field-garden annually; first a mixture of barley and wheat, and subsequently maize. These grains are chiefly raised as stop-gap crops, and for fermenting; maize is thought little of, and to eat much of it is the surest sign of poverty. A number of fruits and vegetables are also raised on the edge of the field-garden to give a variety of flavourings to the main rice dish; the greater number of these are importations from India, such as various varieties of pulse, tomatoes and chilli; some of them however are wild plants found locally and domesticated; such are various lavatera, arums and alliums. The collection of some of these wild plants have some ritual attached to them; the allium *safyou* for example, which is only found in one place, must be dug up with sharpened sticks; if knives are used the supernatural Jamfi *moong* will be angry and throw sticks at the collectors and cause hail and thunder. Even more unpleasant is the mountain plant *chok-li bi* (probably a sort of rhubarb) which is said to be delicious; however you gather that plant hail will fall as the stems are picked.

Cardamum is grown in small clearings all over the lower slopes of the valley. It is a perennial plant propagated by cuttings which are taken in the early spring; the plant reaches its full bearing period within three years; at the end of ten years it starts to decline and new plantings have to be made; this can however be done on the same ground as the plant does not exhaust the soil. The plants need a good deal of care, and have to be hand-weeded at least three times a year, for the buds and fruit form close to the ground. When the fruit is gathered the old growth is cut down and burned. Cardamum plants are a favourite hiding-place for snakes. For the Lepchas cardamum is a foreign importation from Nepal; they always refer to it by its Nepali name—*elaiji*—and with the cultivation of the plant has come a whole complex of alien beliefs and ritual. Nothing is done when the

1: Gorer J-5 (1937)1938 AK5 Lepcha AK5

cardamum is planted, but every year at the flowering time a sacrifice is performed in honour of the supernatural Elaiji-*nyou*, whom the Lepchas equate with Maknyam *moong*, the devil of death. When they first planted cardamum they did no ceremonies, but they got ill; then a Lepcha from outside Zongu learned the proper ritual from a Nepali Jhankri (these priests are somewhat similar to the Mun) and taught it to the Lepchas of Zongu. The rather elaborate ritual has two surprising features; it is only permitted for male Mun to officiate, and the chickens, one of which is given by each household, are hung by their feet while still living during the ceremony and only afterwards killed by a small boy who hits them on the head. Both of these features are unusual in Lepcha ritual; only for the sacrifices to *Thyak-dum* and in the hunting ritual, and a couple of new exorcisms divined in the last ten years are women Mun excluded; and in no other sacrifice at all that I know of are the sacrificial animals ill-treated or made uncomfortable before they are killed. It was also from this foreign source that the Lepchas learned that the presence of menstruating women would blight the plant in flower; this is a completely alien idea, for otherwise menstruating women are paid no attention to. The Lepchas have modified this notion by saying that the plant dislikes any strong smell; soap or excreta would have just the same effect; they will not accept the prevalent Hindu idea of women being essentially unclean.

The main crops of dry rice, millet and buckwheat are grown in the temporary fields. These consist of clearings made in the forest, or rather secondary growth, for one year, and then allowed to lie fallow for seven years before being cultivated again. Nowadays all suitable land is divided up into private holdings, the landmarks consisting of big trees or streams or stones set up at irregular intervals. On the whole these clearings are not isolated; three or more households have all their portions next to one another and travel round together every year. Related households do not usually have adjacent grounds; when the land was originally distributed care was taken, it would seem, that nobody should be especially favoured; and since then the hazards of death and inheritance and split families have assigned the present neighbours.

The clearing of the land is started in the early spring; the women cut down the lower growths with their sickles, while the men climb and lop the bigger trees and saplings. Until recently the trees used to be cut down if possible, but now there is a Court

1: Gorer J-5 (1937)1938 AK5 Lepcha AK5

order forbidding the destruction of trees. When all the debris has been collected the straight sticks are sorted out and the rest is put into heaps and set fire to, the ashes acting as a loosener and fertiliser of the soil. After burning, the ground is cleared of charred wood and the remaining weeds by hand and is then sown with the main crop. This is done in the simplest manner possible; holes are made in the ground with a pointed stick and the seed dropped into and round them.

The principal crops of these temporary fields are dry rice and millet. Twelve varieties of dry rice are named and recognised by small differences in their height, colour of seed and earlier or later ripening. Wild rice is found in the neighbourhood and most of their varieties come from seed selected from these wild plants. One of their most esteemed sorts, the 'black' rice, comes from a small amount of seed collected in the jungle by the elder brother of the Muktair, Tafoor's father; it was grown exclusively for seed for some years and now all the villagers have a good stock of it. The seed of all crops except wet rice is saved from year to year; it is the special business of the 'house-mother' at harvest time to select and put aside the grain which will be needed for the next year's seed. The sowing and harvesting of dry rice is surrounded with an elaborate ritual which will be described later.

A great number of different millets and eleusines are cultivated. Small fields of the earlier ripening varieties are made in the valley and a big field for the main crop is grown higher up. Only one field of dry rice and one of main-crop millet are made every year. Sometimes other grains or plants are grown among these crops, a certain amount of maize or different vegetables if the field-garden cannot take enough. In the autumn, after the rice or millet is gathered, the fields are sown with buckwheat which ripens in about five months; when that is harvested the ground is allowed to lie fallow for seven years. Two sowings of buckwheat are made annually; a big one in the autumn for food, and a smaller one in the spring for seed.

Lepcha agriculture is extremely inefficient by the standard of yield per acre. It is also absolutely inefficient. I was shocked at the carelessness of the sowing, with perhaps a third of the grain lying on the bare ground and the seed in the holes inadequately covered. When I remonstrated I was told 'It doesn't matter; if all the rice were to come up it would be too thick; so that if the birds eat some it will be just right.' To prevent the birds taking too

1: Gorer J-5 (1937)1938 AK5 Lepcha AK5

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Above: CLEARING THE GROUND OF WEEDS AND TWIGS; TOBGÉ TALKS TO CHÉLÉ

Below: PLANTING DRY RICE WITH PLANTING STICKS

N.B.—The camera was not tilted for these pictures.

[facing p. 96]

2: Morris T-5 (1937)1938 AK5 Lepcha AK5

CHAPTER 9

Agriculture and Kindred Subjects

THE main crops in Lingtem are rice (grown both "dry" and "wet," the latter in terraced fields), millet, buckwheat, maize, and barley. The method of growing rice under water in terraced fields, which the Nepali has brought to a fine art, was apparently only introduced into Lingtem some twenty years ago, although Hooker mentions it as being commonly employed in other parts of Sikkim, which he visited as long ago as 1848.

Most Lepchas seem to think that rice grown in terraces is somewhat sweeter to the taste; but that rice grown dry is more nourishing. To me, and I imagine to most Europeans, one kind of rice tastes much the same as another: but people who have made this crop their staple diet are as critical of the various brands as a sunbaked colonel is of his port. But whether dry rice is actually more nourishing is at least open to doubt: what, however, is certain is that the construction of terraces for growing rice under water entails very considerable labour; and I imagine that the Lepcha's natural indolence has led him to prefer the dry variety.

Such terraced fields as there were in Lingtem were badly kept and inefficiently constructed. It would be perfectly easy, as my Nepali servant constantly pointed out, to increase the yield considerably. The point is, however, that the present arrangement gives the Lepcha all he wants to eat. Beyond this he is not interested, for the idea of personal wealth is here not greatly esteemed. From one point of view this is, of course, a most desirable state of affairs. I fear, however, that in the case of the Lepchas it comes more from his indolent habits that from any innate socialist feeling, although this is not entirely absent. There is no doubt, to

2: Morris T-5 (1937)1938 AK5 Lepcha AK5

my mind, that Nepali settlers would increase the yield of this extremely fertile land threefold; but they would do it to their own individual advantage. But if the Nepali, why not the Lepcha? The Lingtem people were always complaining that they could not afford an iron roof for the monastery. I should personally regret to see the present thatch removed; but that is for purely æsthetic reasons. A roof of corrugated iron would doubtless be more efficient, and if the people really want one, to say nothing of schools and other desiderata, it would be perfectly possible for them, by means of better agricultural methods, to raise the necessary funds. As at present constituted they have in their social structure all the makings of the perfect socialist state; but they have, of course, no leaders. What they require is a missionary; a non-religious missionary, that is; someone of the type that has obtained such remarkable results amongst the one-time ignorant peasants of Russia.

Jongu is now protected for the Lepchas and is to all intents and purposes an ethnological museum. Since it is a museum it may just as well be a good one; and the improvement of the people's condition, in which I would include sufficient education to free them from the thraldom of gods and demons, would form an unique opportunity for some educated Lepcha. There are many such in the Kalimpong district, where education has been long available; but removed from their natural environment Lepchas are forced to suppress their more altruistic characteristics in the general struggle for existence. In a district which cannot absorb even a fraction of its educated population this state of affairs is inevitable; at any rate until such time as manual work is no longer considered to be unsuited to the dignity of the so-called educated classes. In the meantime here is a chance for some public-spirited Lepcha; someone who still has some regard for the better qualities of the tribe to which he belongs. If the Jongu people remain as at present their total extinction as a separate tribe is only a matter of a few more generations. This, in view of their many admirable qualities,

2: Morris T-5 (1937)1938 AK5 Lepcha AK5

would be a pity; but no one can wish to see them preserved as mere "museum specimens," which is what they are at present. After this short digression on possible improvements let us now return to the subject of agriculture.

Rice terraces are used every year; but it is usual to plant a different one of the six or seven varieties in use each year, as this is considered to be less exhausting to the ground. Dal, or pulse, which is the almost invariable accompaniment to cooked rice in the greater part of India, cannot here be grown on account of the coldness of the climate. The Mandal thinks that compared with "dry" cultivation the terraces give a slightly higher yield per acre: moreover, once made they are easier to work and less liable to damage by cattle. They can also be ploughed; whereas all other cultivation, except the few more level fields around the house, has to be laboriously prepared by hand. For this purpose a large hoe, with its blade turned at right angles to the handle, is the only tool in use, as is also the case in most parts of Nepal which I have visited. Not every man possesses a plough; but it is always possible to borrow a neighbour's, giving one's labour in payment when required.

Most of the crops in Lingtem are grown in fields which are used only once in every eight years, after which they are allowed to revert to forest. This system is very common in Assam, where it resulted in the complete deforestation of large areas before it could be controlled. In Lingtem, however, it is at least not harmful; for owing to the abundant rainfall the forest grows again in the course of four or five years. This is not to say, however, that more productive use could not be made of the land.

5th April:

We heard that Jiroong was sowing his dry rice this morning and accordingly went to investigate. This involved a steep climb for some five or six hundred feet above the monastery. In addition to Jiroong and his wife (plus the babies, who were left to play), there were present also

2: Morris T-5 (1937)1938 AK5 Lepcha AK5

243 Tobgay (his adopted son) and wife, his brother-in-law
[602] (Tempa), and one or two others, all relations of one sort or another. Working in an adjacent patch of forest was an old woman, her adopted son and his wife. The ground was being prepared by means of billhooks, but hoes were also in use. As soon as the undergrowth has been cut away the jungle is burnt and the ground lightly scratched, but not properly turned over. The larger trees are left standing; but the branches are lopped and only the leaves at the top of the tree are left. This is to ensure that they grow again next year, when the land reverts to forest. The ground was the steepest
[31] I have ever seen used for cultivation: in some places it was so steep that it was difficult to stand. Here and there long lengths of wood had been laid along the ground and held in position with pegs: this in an attempt to sheer up the hillside in the steepest places. At the lowest level of the field millet had already been planted: to-day rice was being sown in the central portion, and to-morrow they will plant the top section with maize. Once the planting of a field with rice is commenced it must be finished the same day, or the demons will cause it harm. The rice planted to-day will be reaped in September, when this field will then be used for buck-wheat. This will be ready in December, after which this particular land will lie fallow for another eight years.

243 Jiroong says that the group of people who own adjacent
571 pieces of forest always arrange to cultivate them in the same year; that is to say, the people who are working the fields on either side of Jiroong to-day will be beside him again next year, but in a different part of the forest.

476 Boundaries between fields are roughly marked with stones;
423 but in actual practice an area of this sort is worked as though
243 it was one large field. When people help each other in the fields they do not receive any payment, but are given food during the day. But all help is, of course, reciprocal.

243 The method of sowing was as follows: One person moved slowly along with a stick in each hand. With these two sticks he made a hole a few inches deep into which a second person

2: Morris T-5 (1937)1938 AK5 Lepcha AK5

who was following behind, dropped the seed. Several grains were dropped into each hole and no attempt was made to cover them up with earth. I suggested that this was somewhat wasteful, and pointed to the crows waiting anxiously on the edge of the field. "But if the seeds are covered with earth," said Tempa, "they will come up much too thickly: as it is, the birds will eat half, and the result will be just about right." Apparently there will be some sort of ceremony in Jiroong's house this evening: this to ensure that the birds do not eat too much!

I noticed that amongst the seed for planting were three potatoes. These were also to be planted in the field for the purpose of providing seed for next year's crop. I suggested that so few a number would be lost sight of in so large a field. Jiroong agreed: he usually planted them in the field outside his house, but was trying them here to see what happened. There is no ceremony in connection with planting the first seed; nor does it matter whether men or women do the planting. To-day the actual planting was being done by women; but this was of no significance.

Once planted, these forest fields are left to fend for themselves, and are apparently not often weeded. The people realise the importance of manuring; but this is not possible in the case of the more distant fields. The forest itself is potentially valuable, but is not at present worked except to provide for such timber as is required for local construction. But in any case the cost of transportation would be prohibitive in the present circumstances.

Later same day:

Rain made it impossible for Jiroong to finish his rice-planting to-day; but even so, the ceremony in honour of *Mayel Rum*, which should rightly not be done until the planting is finished, was carried out this evening. We were told "*Kyet manin*"—"it doesn't really matter!"—an expression one hears more constantly than any other. The planting will be completed to-morrow.

2: Morris T-5 (1937)1938 AK5 Lepcha AK5

243 A small domestic ceremony, such as we witnessed this evening, is performed after any planting of crops; but the most important one is that carried out when all planting for the year is over. This is known as *Sunkyo Fut*, as is the ceremony performed at harvest time, when *chi* and various sorts of grain are offered to the gods, as in our own Harvest Festival. If necessary the three ceremonies may be telescoped into one; in which case the time selected is the rice harvest, since this is, in any case, the most important ceremony.

Most of the people we had seen working in the fields were present in Jiroong's house this evening. The ceremony was performed by a Mun, but this is not essential: the householder can do it just as well. We sat about a bit before anything happened and were given the usual *chi* to drink. Later on, a brass plate was put down in front of the Mun, in the centre of which was a small wooden drinking-cup, decorated as usual with a smear of butter round its rim and containing the special ceremonial mixture of *chi* and various grains. On the old man's left was a bowl of incense, of [314] juniper, I think. The Mun exhorted the gods to give a good harvest, and urged them to cause no damage by rain or hail. Later, he called on the insects and birds and implored them to do no damage. From time to time, in the course of his exhortations, he took a little of the *chi* up in a piece of banana leaf and sprinkled it on the floor. When the ceremony was over this leaf was handed to another old man, who took it and threw it away outside. At the same time Jiroong's wife came and removed the tray, and as she did so she finished off the remains of the ceremonial *chi*. While the ceremony was [78] [888] [857] still in progress old Pong-ring wanted to go outside. He is old and feeble and nearly blind. A small boy at once got up and, without being told, helped the old man out, and later brought him in again.

243 533 As soon as the Mun had finished the ceremony Jiroong sang what sounded like a hymn, after which his sister gave us another. These songs are always sung on these occasions and are invocations to the gods to look after the crops.

2: Morris T-5 (1937)1938 AK5 Lepcha AK5

When Jiroong carries out the ceremony at harvest time he must call in the same men who have celebrated to-day; otherwise it means bad luck. The actual harvest ceremony is best done before the reaping commences; but may, if necessary, be postponed. The eldest male living in each house must be the first to taste the new crops. He also offers a small portion to the gods. Should he be absent from home at the time of the harvest a little of the crops first reaped must be put aside pending his return. The seed for the next year's planting is generally selected by the senior woman of the house; but this is not essential and apparently has no significance, although it looks as though it may have originated in some sort of fertility rite. The woman who sings at the time of the planting ceremony (in this particular case Jiroong's sister) must also reap the first three handfuls of rice at harvest time: but, as usual—*Kyet manin!* The singing is done to please the gods.

At the time of the rice harvest, usually some time in early September (the actual day is co-ordinated throughout the district), everyone goes to the fields to dance. I was not present at this time of the year but arranged for a demonstration of the dances, the purpose of which is to separate the straw from the grain. There were about eight different changes of step, mostly various combinations of hopping and jumping, alternating with much stamping of feet. They are "physical jerks" more than dances, and are carried out with great vigour. A lady missionary told me on no account to miss this dancing, since it was "a very pretty and charming rite": what she omitted to tell me, however (and presumably did not know), was that the celebrations are carried on into the night. Anyone who takes part in the dancing must spend the whole of that night in the fields; and on this occasion what is sometimes referred to as "the greatest licence" prevails, the ordinary rules of conduct being completely disregarded. No reason could be given for this orgy; but it is, of course, a well-known fertility rite in many parts of the world.

2: Morris T-5 (1937)1938 AK5 Lepcha AK5

shelter, for he was hungry and tired. There were many huge pigs lying about outside the house, one of which the people killed and roasted. They also gave him *chi* and rice, which he had never before tasted. He stayed in Mayel for seven days; and when he left the people gave him all sorts of grains and vegetables, at the same time asking him to tell no one what he had seen. On the way back the pumpkins, cucumbers, and other vegetables turned into stone; but the rice was planted and has been cultivated in Lingtem ever since."

* * * * *

No food is exported from Jongu, the people growing merely sufficient to meet their own needs; and to this I think may partly be attributed their superior physique compared, for instance, with Lepchas in the Kalimpong and Darjeeling districts of British India.

Rice grown in the hills is of much better quality than that grown in the plains and is in demand all over India. Kalimpong rice, for instance, sells at the present time (July 1937) at Rs5/4 a maund (approximately eighty pounds), whereas that grown in the plains can be bought in Kalimpong for Rs3/4 a maund. The depressing result of this economic factor is that the town-dwelling Lepcha (and of course the Nepali) is forced to sell his own rice for export, while himself living on the inferior plains variety; and there is no doubt that his physique and general health suffer accordingly.

Tuberculosis, for instance, is spreading alarmingly in these two districts, whereas in Jongu it is at present practically unknown. From statistics given me by the Tuberculosis dispensary in Kalimpong it appears that at present the incidence of this disease is considerably less amongst Lepchas than amongst the other people; but even amongst them it is steadily gaining ground. This, as I have already pointed out, is probably not unconnected with the different living conditions of the two peoples; but a more nourishing diet, such as the people get in their own natural conditions, would undoubtedly help towards stamping out the disease.

11:Hermanns M-5 (1951)1954
AK5 Lepcha AK5

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25. Lepcha children starting for field work

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26. Lepcha women planting rice

Fig. 23-24 p. 99

[End Plate 9]

11:Hermanns M-5 (1951)1954
AK5 Lepcha AK5

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27. Lepcha farmer winnowing rice

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28. Lepcha shepherd with rain-cap

[End plate 10]